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SUBJECT: CAMBODIA: SEX AND SLAVERY IN SIEM REAP

¶1. Summary. PolOff traveled to Siem Reap to meet with NGOs, government officials, and conduct direct observations and interviews at commercial sex establishments to better assess the trafficking in persons (TIP) problem and the action that is being taken to combat TIP in the province. NGOs unanimously reported good cooperation with the government and an increase in the number of successful prosecutions. The Governor explained that combating TIP has become a priority for the government and he is committed to preventing Siem Reap from becoming a destination for sex tourists. Sex workers, NGOs, government officials, and a victim of trafficking explained how desperate poverty pushed women into the commercial sex industry and made other women vulnerable to victimization by the sex industry. The potential to earn money will continue to attract women from the countryside, despite heightened awareness raising and prevention campaigns regarding the dangers of trafficking. End Summary.

NGOs on TIP

¶2. Anti-trafficking NGOs in Siem Reap Province unanimously reported good cooperation with the government and an increase in the number of successfully convicted traffickers. NGO Cambodian Women's Crisis Center (CWCC) stated that cooperation between government and NGOs has improved tremendously and noted that both male and female traffickers are now being arrested, prosecuted, and convicted - with many receiving sentences of 5-15 years imprisonment. The Cambodian Defenders Project (CDP), an NGO that provides legal assistance to victims and legal training to the police, commented that it has seen improved investigations and collection of evidence by the police. CDP added that prosecutors are now receiving sufficiently strong cases that enable them to obtain convictions in the court. NGO LICADHO, which takes a reactive approach to trafficking, explained that it had not received any complaints from TIP victims in the past year. Agir pour les Femmes en Situation Precaire (AFESIP) added the greatest challenge it faced in gaining cooperation was not from the government, but from the "victims" after they had been rescued. AFESIP explained that the vast majority of sex workers are adult voluntary workers who do not want to leave their lucrative positions. All of the NGOs expressed concern that increased tourism to Siem Reap could lead to an increase in human trafficking. NGOs also explained that there were rumors of victims being relocated to Siem Reap following the 2004 closure of the notorious Sway Pak brothel area in Phnom Penh.

¶3. NGO Friends, which recently opened a drop-in center for street children in Siem Reap, explained that while it has no specific information on human trafficking, it has heard rumors that special houses outside the city have been established for Asian sex tourists. Friends explained that

its Child Safe program, which trains traditional facilitators (moto and tuk-tuk taxi drivers) about the importance of protecting vulnerable children and reporting suspicious activity, is a good source of information about the local situation. Its facilitators have reported a high demand for sexual services, which coupled with the large population of migrants attracted to Siem Reap's booming economy, could produce a climate that encourages human trafficking. Friends explained that although it has no clear information, it is concerned that poor families might engage in trafficking their children. Friends also reported that many children engage in selling postcards and other souvenirs to foreign tourists are earning roughly \$200-\$300 per month (a significant amount considering many adult laborers earn \$1-\$2 per day). However, Friends has received numerous reports of many of these same children are propositioning foreign tourists to engage in commercial sex acts, which could create a increased demand in the province. The Child Safe program, which began in September 2005, has trained 51 moto taxi and tuk-tuk drivers to report suspicious activity, but has yielded no reports to date.

Sex Work in Seam Reap

14. AFESIP reported that there are approximately 45 commercial sex establishments in Siem Reap and roughly 1,050 sex workers. AFESIP explained that through its HIV prevention program, it is able to obtain inside information on potential victims working in commercial sex establishments. The Department of Women's Affairs explained that most sex workers come from poor or broken families, while some come to make money to pay for their weddings or to earn the necessary capital to start a small business.

PHNOM PENH 00000661 002 OF 004

15. NGO Cambodian Women for Peace and Development (CWPD), which focuses HIV education and reduction activities for direct and indirect sex workers, informed PolOff that there are more than 100 commercial sex venues in Siem Reap, which attract Khmer and foreign clients. CWPD has mapped all known commercial sex establishments and has received permission from the management to meet with the sex workers and provide them with health education, counseling, life planning, and information on vocational training opportunities. CWPD informed PolOff that it believes that the vast majority of sex workers are adult voluntary workers; however, there may be a small number of victims who are not given permission to meet with CWPD, are too frightened to confide in the NGO, or have been placed in the establishment because of their family's impoverished economic situation. According to CWPD, most of the sex workers in the large establishments are either women who have graduated high school and are unable to continue their studies or women who migrated to Siem Reap to work as manual laborers and discovered that commercial sex work was much more lucrative. CWPD conducts weekly meetings to inform commercial sex workers about other economic alternatives; however, it is required to give a \$2-\$3 per diem to recruit participants and few are willing to leave sex work for less lucrative positions. Those who do leave face discrimination because of their past professional history.

16. Commercial sex establishments in Siem Reap, like most other towns in Cambodia, are divided into three types/zones: Khmer brothel zones, Vietnamese brothel zones, and high-end massage/karaoke parlors that are scattered throughout the town. CWDP believes that very few sex workers are held against their will and if there are underage victims, they are well hidden. CWDP explained that during Tet, Vietnamese brothels are empty, as nearly all of the sex workers return to Vietnam to be with their families. CWDP explained that most Vietnamese sex workers traveled to Cambodia specifically to work in the sex industry in order to earn sufficient capital to return to Vietnam and start a business. CWDP noted that it has encountered a small number of trafficking

victims who were in a situation of debt bondage, but explained that much has been done in the area of awareness-raising and that women now understand their rights.

CWDP explained that five years ago many women could not leave the brothels; however, now when a new large commercial sex establishment opens, many workers voluntarily seek employment with the new establishment because it will increase their income. In the past three years, CWDP has rescued five women who were in a situation of debt bondage and these women have returned to work as volunteers with the organization. CWDP explained that the situation for commercial sex workers has greatly improved over the years and they are empowered and oftentimes financially successful.

17. PolOff accompanied CWDP to various commercial sex establishments and spoke with various workers about the origins of their involvement in the sex industry. Many of the workers were divorced women with children who traveled to Siem Reap from their villages seeking anonymity and were sending money back to their villages to support their families. There were also a significant number of women who lived in the brothels with their husbands or boyfriends. The vast majority of the Khmer and Vietnamese brothels are small family-run business -- oftentimes with grandparents, children, and sex workers living, eating, and playing together. These brothels house between two to ten sex workers, who report that they are able to earn between \$.75 and \$5 per customer, with the possibility of earning \$5-\$50 per night. The women explained that the vast majority of their clients are Cambodians and they only rarely see foreign clients. The workers explained that they usually share half of the fees with the house in exchange for room, board, and security. The Vietnamese brothel area was comprised of similar small-scale brothels and owners reported that they are short-staffed, as many of the workers left for the larger karaoke/massage parlors where there is a much greater potential to earn higher incomes. During visits to high-end karaoke/massage parlors, sex workers explained that most had come to work in these locations after a friend from their villages had returned and told them about the potential to earn significant incomes as a sex worker. According to these sex workers, they entered into this profession without deception. They explained that they received approximately \$20-\$30 per customer (both foreign and Cambodian) before paying \$10 for the room rental.

18. PolOff later conducted informal observation of the commercial sex establishments under the guise of a potential

PHNOM PENH 00000661 003 OF 004

customer, visiting approximately 40 establishments. PolOff observed several hundred sex workers in various sex establishments and spoke to sex workers and clients, both Cambodian and foreign. The clients in the brothel areas were primarily Cambodian men and boys. One boy informed PolOff that if he behaves well or gets good grades at school, his father will reward him with a trip to the brothel. Most Asian and Western tourists were observed frequenting the high-end karaoke/massage establishments. During observations PolOff did not witness any sex workers who appeared to be clearly underage in the brothel areas, but it is impossible to determine whether any had been deceived or were in a situation of debt bondage. PolOff received information from a moto taxi driver of a sex establishment that had young girls available to customers. PolOff observed two girls who appeared to be underage and provided NGO International Justice Mission with the information for appropriate investigation and action.

A Victim Speaks Out

19. PolOff visited the Cambodian Women's Crisis Center (CWCC) shelter, which housed about 60 residents, most of whom are victims of domestic violence and rape. CWCC explained that the greatest problem facing women and girls in Cambodia is

not human trafficking, but sexual assault, as there has been a dramatic increase in the number of reported rapes, both by fellow villagers and family members. PolOff met with the one trafficking victim, "Srey Pov", who explained how she became victimized. Twenty-year-old Srey Pov had been working as a manual laborer in her rural village in order to support her ill parents, when an female acquaintance from the construction site informed her that better paying jobs awaited them in Siem Reap. Srey Pov asked her parents for permission to go, but they refused. Nonetheless, she felt it was her duty to support her parents financially and ran away to Siem Reap with her acquaintance. However, instead of finding work in a restaurant, Srey Pov found herself placed into a house where she was told she would receive guests. After three days, an affluent Khmer man came into her room and attempted to force himself upon her. Srey Pov managed to fight the man off and found her way to the CWCC shelter where she hopes to receive vocational training and eventually employment so that she can fulfill her filial duty to assist her parents. She refuses to contact her parents until she is able to provide them with financial assistance.

¶10. PolOff discovered that Srey Pov had received information from various awareness-raising campaigns and was aware of the importance of safe migration practices, yet she explained that because of her desperate economic situation, she was willing to take the risk. CWCC informed PolOff that it provides weaving and haircutting vocational training to its residents, from which they may be able to earn \$1-\$2 per day. PolOff also visited a stone carving business, which had received trainee referrals from anti-trafficking NGO COSECAM. The trainees explained that after finishing a 60-day training period during which they receive a small salary, they begin to receive a commission from sales and are able to earn \$5-10 per day from their labor. It is interesting to note that this private business initiative -- which receives no donor funding or technical assistance -- could possibly be the most successful example in Cambodia of a viable alternative for those vulnerable to and victimized by human trafficking.

The Government Response

¶11. Deputy Provincial Governor Ung Oeun explained that the Prime Minister had issued a strict order to all provincial officials that significant efforts be made to combat human trafficking. However, he noted that despite government actions, the trafficking problem persists. The Deputy Governor explained that although Siem Reap town is affluent and developed, it is the second most impoverished province in Cambodia (following Pailin). He explained that the Province had suffered from damaging droughts and floods over the past years, but that 2005 yielded a 60,000 ton surplus of rice. He believed that the population was particularly vulnerable to human trafficking during the low-yield years and hopes that the increased harvest, coupled with improved transportation and educational infrastructure will reduce poverty and decrease the vulnerability of the local inhabitants.

¶12. PolOff met with the chief of the provincial

PHNOM PENH 00000661 004 OF 004

anti-trafficking unit, Sun Bunthorn, who explained that his unit has observed increased numbers of tourists to the province and an increase in entertainment complexes, which he believes could create an increase in trafficking victims. Nonetheless, Bunthorn believed that the vast majority of commercial sex workers are adult women voluntarily working in the sex industry. He reported that his unit conducted 10 raids in 2005, removing 96 workers, two of whom were underage victims and one who was victimized by force. Buthorn commented that his unit has faced difficulty in gathering sufficient evidence to obtain convictions, since most removed workers refuse to cooperate. He also expressed his

frustration of not receiving information from NGOs after workers had been removed and placed in their care. Buthorn explained that it was impossible for his unit to understand trafficking trends, methods, and modes without additional information that NGO shelters are able to gather during the assessment of the victim.

Comment

¶13. It is clear that the government's will to combat human trafficking has extended to Siem Reap Province and that provincial authorities are taking increased action. Informal observation of commercial sex establishments is reassuring in that there do not appear to be blatantly underage girls available for commercial sex acts. However, the danger exists that sexual slavery will be pushed much deeper underground and will require increasingly sophisticated approaches to combat it -- something that local police and NGOs currently do not possess. It is also important that NGOs begin to not only seek cooperation with the anti-trafficking units, but also begin to provide assistance so that anti-trafficking units obtain a more complete understanding of the problem and can adjust their law enforcement approaches accordingly. Awareness-raising campaigns appear to have reached broad audiences throughout the province; however, it is clear how the economic plight of the desperately poor does necessarily lead to behavioral modification. End Comment.
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